

## **Implementation Guidelines for Topical Advisory Team Reviews**

### **Background and Purpose**

In 1998, the National Sea Grant Office (NSGO) issued a policy document on the implementation of program evaluation procedures in the National Sea Grant College Program (NSGCP). The purpose of the document was to provide a framework for program evaluation for use by Sea Grant program directors and their staff, the staff of the NSGO members of the national Sea Grant Review Panel (SGRP), members of program assessment teams (PATs), the Sea Grant Association, and other interested parties. The policy document emphasized that program evaluation “must be an ongoing, continuous process.” Among the procedures highlighted for on-going evaluation were topical advisory team (TAT) reviews, which were defined as follows:

“Topical advisory team reviews provide the opportunity for a program to receive an outside advice by a small team of experts on a specific program element and/or a specific program management mechanism. Topical advisory team reviews are not mandatory and may be requested by a Sea Grant institution, the NSGO or PAT. A topical advisory team review should result in a written recommendations report.”

Topical advisory team reviews, which are designed to complement PATs, have certain attributes associated with their use. The purpose of a topical advisory team review is to provide the opportunity for a small team of persons knowledgeable in the topical area, working with the program director and invitees, to evaluate an element or area of the Sea Grant program through an exchange of information and to offer advice. The team’s responsibility is to render opinions, options, and conclusions in a written report in an effort to improve the program element under review. Topical advisory team reviews provide for a focused, intensive review of a program element (management, research sub-program, communication, education, extension) or a specific issue that needs to be addressed by a program element. Examples might include implementing a new program planning process, developing a new research sub-program or re-organizing the communications program to utilize emerging communications technology. Because funding decisions are de-coupled from the process, topical advisory team reviews provide a venue for open and frank dialogue among the topical advisory team (TAT) members and affected parties. Topical advisory team reviews provide external expert opinion which can often be helpful to move internal, institutional decisions. A topical advisory team review may be suggested by a variety of parties, but will take place only on the invitation of the program director.

Since adoption of the program evaluation procedures there have been several topical advisory team reviews conducted, and the NSGO has received inquiries about topical advisory team review procedures from several other programs. The purpose of these guidelines is to establish topical advisory team review procedures and to provide guidance to all parties involved with conducting TAT reviews (programs, NSGO, SGRP, institution administrators, faculty and staff).

## **Topical Advisory Team Review Procedures**

**Initiation Process** – A topical advisory team review can be requested by any party (the Sea Grant Program, NSGO, PAT, etc.), but because topical advisory team reviews are not mandatory, both the directors of the host Sea Grant program and the NSGCP must mutually agree to conduct one. Requests for topical advisory team reviews from Sea Grant programs must be submitted in writing to the Director of the NSGCP from the Sea Grant program director or his/her supervisor. The Director of the NSGCP shall affirm or decline the request in writing. Similarly, a request for a topical advisory team review from the NSGO should be submitted in writing by the Director of the NSGCP to the Sea Grant program director or his/her supervisor as appropriate. The Sea Grant program director or his/her supervisor shall affirm or decline the request in writing. The agreement should also address how the costs of the topical advisory team review will be assigned. In general, the costs of the assessments should be shared. However, funding flexibility should be maintained to allow for unforeseen budgetary scenarios.

For planning, scheduling and budgeting purposes, parties are encouraged to request topical advisory team reviews by October 1 of the fiscal year that the assessments are intended to take place.

**Scope of Advisory Team Reviews** – Once a topical advisory team review has been agreed to in principle, the scope of the review, the review objectives and a tentative agenda will be determined by the director of the Sea Grant program in consultation with the NSGO program officer for the program. The Sea Grant director is responsible for communicating the purpose, procedures and schedule of the review to appropriate senior university officials. In general, the senior university officials are encouraged to attend the exit interview and to participate in the advisory team review as appropriate. Other institutional partners (faculty, administrators, etc.) with an interest in the outcome of the review should be notified in advance of the review and provided an opportunity for written comments for use by the TAT. Because of their particular expertise, TAT members should be provided an opportunity for input to the agenda once the TAT is established.

### **Roles and Responsibilities for TAT Leadership** –

*Director NSGCP* – The Director of the NSGCP is responsible for agreeing on behalf of the NSGO to conduct the review. The NSGCP Director is also responsible for formally appointing members of the TAT after receiving recommendations for TAT members from the Sea Grant director and program officer. The NSGCP Director will name a chair from among the TAT members. A TAT typically has four or five members.

*Sea Grant Director* – The Sea Grant director of the host program is responsible for agreeing on behalf of the program to host the review. The Sea Grant director is also responsible for working with the program officer to establish the goals, objectives and scope of the review and for logistics and travel arrangements within state during the review.

*Program Officer* – The program officer is responsible for organizing the TAT including arranging for the TAT members to participate in the review once selected by the Director of NSGCP. The program officer will participate as an ex-officio member of the TAT, serve as staff to it, and assume responsibilities for compiling, editing and distributing the final TAT report.

**TAT Report** – A written report and an exit interview is required as part of the topical advisory team review process. The exit interview will be conducted by the TAT Chair prior to the team leaving the institution. Although it is expected that all TAT members will contribute sections of the written report, it is the responsibility of the NSGO Program Officer to compile the final draft, which will be signed by the chair of the TAT and distributed to the program from the NSGO. Typically, the TAT report will be distributed to the Sea Grant director and his/her institutional supervisor unless arrangements are negotiated for other distribution during the preliminary request for a topical advisory team review. The TAT report will be entered into the permanent NSGO program file and will be available for use by subsequent PATs.